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The UKNCC Guest Contributor Programme offers contrasting 'short, sharp reads' for those seeking a fuller exploration of key questions. This issue explores:

"How does China view the future of world order?"

Authors, alphabetically by surname:

- *Dr. Olivia Cheung, Research Fellow, SOAS China Institute*
- *Dr Sari Arho Havrén, RUSI Associate Fellow and visiting scholar at the University of Helsinki*
- *Dr. Catherine Jones, Lecturer, University of St Andrews*

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How does China view the future of world order?

Dr. Olivia Cheung
Research Fellow, SOAS China Institute
May 2024

Response 1 of 3

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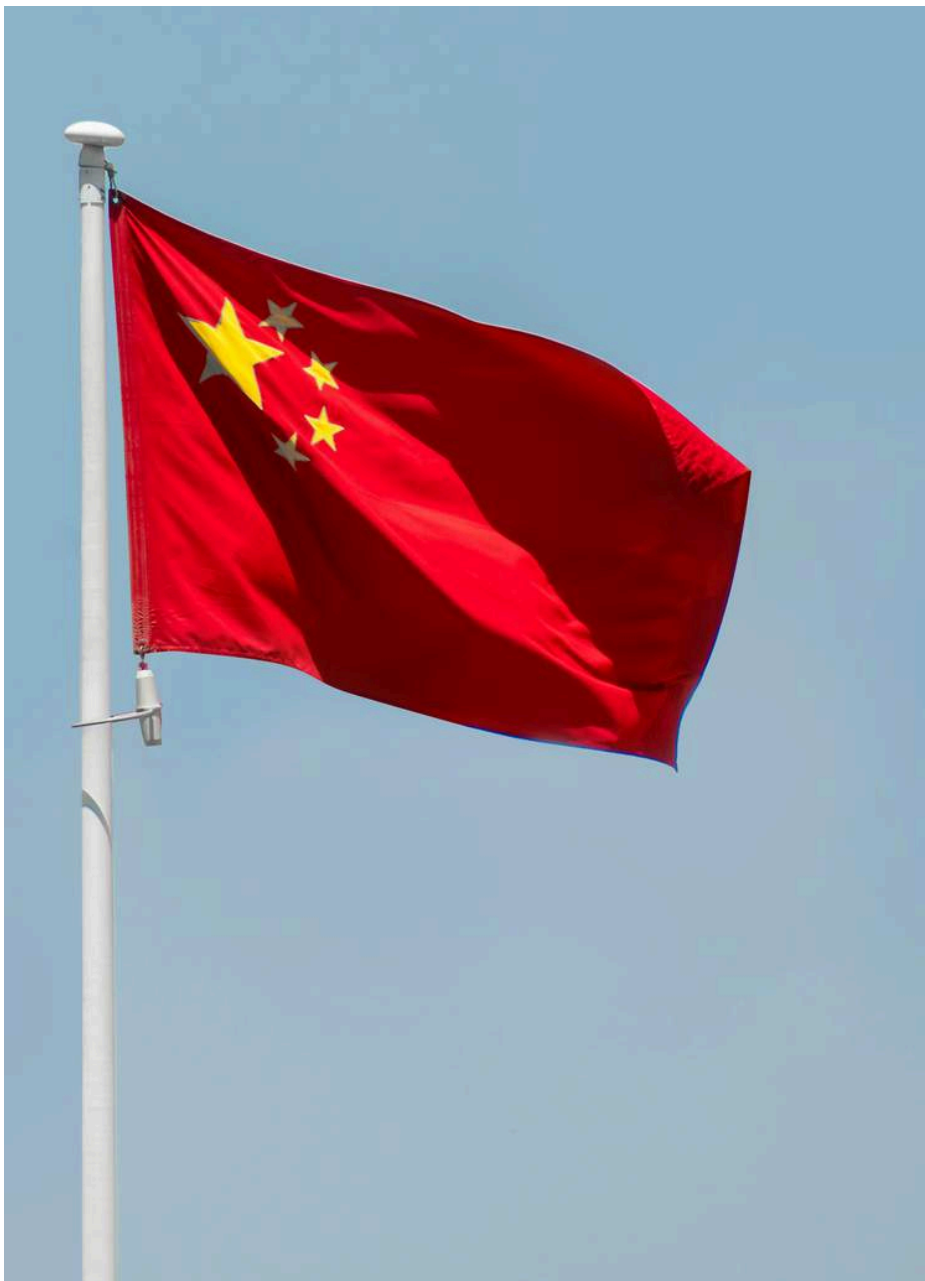


China's supreme leader Xi Jinping seeks to transform the existing international order into a "more democratic" and China-friendly one. In this respect, Xi has introduced three Global Initiatives: on Development (2021), Security (2022), and Civilisation (2023). These constitute China's proposals for a new global governance system and the forging of a "common destiny for humankind," as per the Chinese Foreign Ministry's 2023 Proposal on the Reform and Development of Global Governance.

Xi complains that the current world order, dominated by the US-led West and default liberal values and norms, is biased not only against China, but also developing countries — the Global South. In China's view, the US-led world order furthers the interests of wealthy Western nations by virtue of keeping the Global South down. For China this is nothing short of power politics and bullying: not only is this order unjust, it is also not fit for purpose for the 21st century. This unsustainability is allegedly self-evident through what Xi has termed the "four deficits," or the lack of "peace, security, trust, and governance," in inter-state relations.

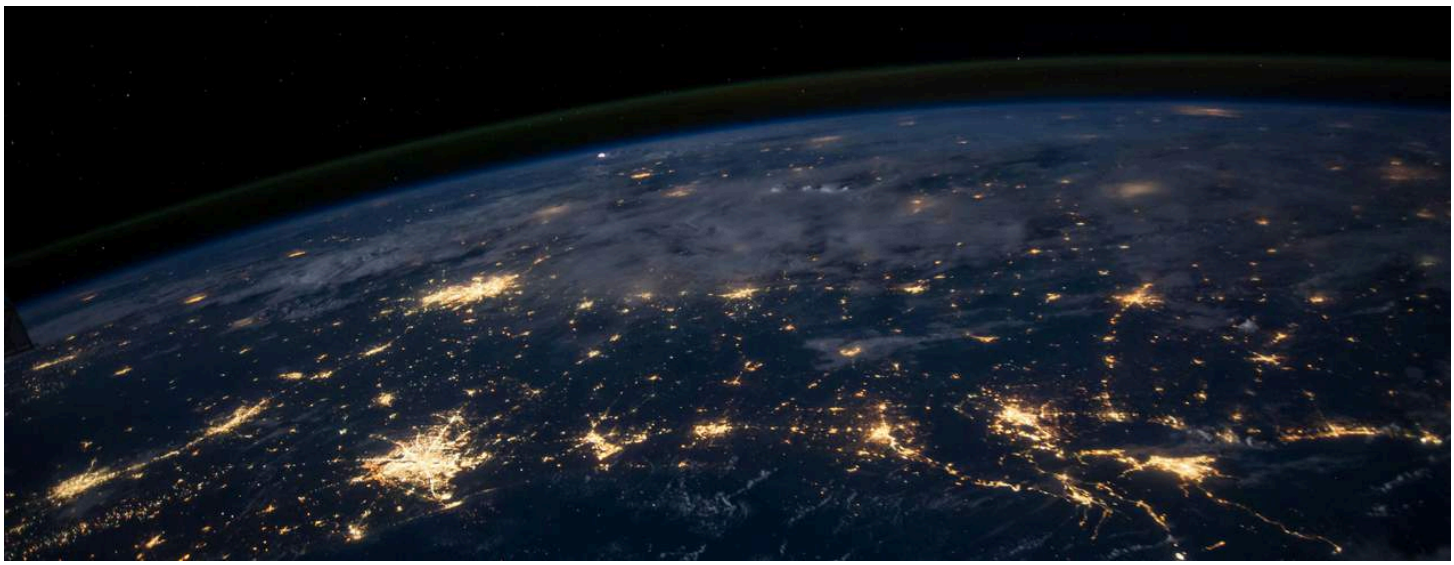
Based on the above, Xi has made the case that fundamental reform to the international system is long overdue. More specifically, it needs to be "democratised." How? And, as per the 2023 Proposal, the way forward is to implement his three Global Initiatives. This should, he contends, correct biases against the Global South, and hence enhance the power of the China-led Global South vis-à-vis Western nations.

The Global Development Initiative was introduced to show that China genuinely has the interests of the Global South in mind. In line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it posits that the post-pandemic recovery of developing countries is the topmost priority, topping the agenda of global post-pandemic recovery. The Global Development Initiative identifies poverty alleviation, food security, equitable vaccine distribution, development financing, climate change, industrialisation, digital economy, and connectivity, as "priority areas" for the Global South. These "priority areas" have seen heightened Chinese engagement with the Global South, as evidenced through the Belt and Road Initiative, the United Nations and other multilateral institutions.

The Global Security Initiative was put forward at a time when Russia's invasion of Ukraine plunged Europe into its worst security crisis since the end of the Second World War.

It maintains that "all countries are equal in terms of security interests." This reinforces Beijing's expressed sympathy for Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine and criticism of NATO for its treatment of Russia. Allegedly, NATO's expansion has "disregarded [sic.] Russia's legitimate security concerns and driven [sic.] it to the corner of confrontation," a claim that NATO has strongly refuted. Beijing's concept paper of the Initiative condemns the "abuse" of "unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction." Condemning the treatment it has received from Western nations and organisations, the Initiative seeks to promote the United Nations, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, BRICS, and other multilateral institutions that are pro-China or amenable to being Beijing-friendly as platforms to promote dialogue that can further peace and stability. These are implicitly contrasted with NATO and other US-led military alliances or partnerships, repudiated for seeking their own security to the detriment of the security of others. This critique was outlined in a joint statement issued by China and Russia on February 4th 2022, shortly before Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The Global Civilisation Initiative holds that there are "diversified paths towards modernisation." It maintains that no country should be put under pressure to "copy other countries' development model" and that each country is entitled to the right of "independent development." The global governance system should thus respect the "diversity of civilisations." "Civilisations" are primarily understood as the political systems of individual countries, each valuable in their own merit. These proclamations echo a speech Xi made in 2015: "Since the end of the Cold War, some countries afflicted by Western values have been in turmoil … If we tailor our practices to the Western capitalist value system or measure China's development against the Western capitalist evaluation system—in other words, upholding the Western standard as the sole standard, and repudiating deviations from it as backward and obsolete—I dread to contemplate the consequences! We will either trail behind slavishly or subject to abuse." According to Xi, criticism of China's one-party political system, human rights record, or state-centric economic model, is tantamount to disrespect to the Chinese civilisation, and malpractice of "true multilateralism." Many nations, often in the Global South and particularly those with colonial histories or records of human rights violations, are sensitive to foreign criticism of their domestic affairs. Xi's Global Civilisation Initiative, while undoubtedly self-serving, also resonates with these governments. Whilst China asserts that the three Initiatives protect the legitimate rights and interests of the Global South, in reality, their main purpose is the advancing of China's interests, rights, and worldview within the international system.



In *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, based on a contextualised interpretation of all of Xi's main speeches and writings, Steve Tsang and I concluded that Xi's vision of a Sino-centric world order is his modern adaptation of *tianxia* (literally "all-under-heaven"). Xi said in 2017: "The Chinese nation has aspired for 'all being one family under heaven' since ancient times. We believe in harmony between humankind and the world, harmony among all nations, and great harmony for all under *tianxia*. We long for the utopian world of "when the Great Way prevails, *tianxia* works" for the common good." . . . People of different countries across the world should uphold the concept of "we are all one family under heaven," embrace each other with open arms, understand each other, seek commonalities and respect differences, and collectively work hard to build the common destiny for humankind."

Tianxia is the Sino-centric order in pre-modern East Asia, one which was in place at various points in time between imperial China's Qin (221-206 BC) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties.

When *tianxia* dictated China's relations with the international stage, China's influence and leverage travelled as far as pre-modern logistical capabilities allowed.

The *tianxia* order was hierarchical: when China was economically and militarily the most powerful country, it was venerated by vassal states at its periphery, which submitted to China in the interests of their security and prosperity. This model also captured an element of admiration of Chinese culture. In exchange for their submission, China offered its vassal states valuable trading opportunities and security assurance.

In Xi's romanticised reconstruction of pre-modern Asian history, as seen in his speeches on the Belt and Road Initiative for example, *tianxia* delivered lasting peace and stability. In reality the Chinese empire resorted to force to assert its authority like other great empires elsewhere.

Tsang and I concluded that Xi is pursuing a five-pronged strategy to re-create his vision of tianxia for today's world. These are:

1. Prioritise the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) security, which includes Xi's security, over standard calculation of national interests;
2. Double down on CCP-centric nationalism, especially when asserting China's contested sovereignty claims;
3. Prioritise China's interests and values, as defined by the Party, above those of other countries and the international system;
4. Establish and consolidate Chinese leadership in international organisations and throughout the world, while simultaneously avoiding global responsibilities or burdens that do not benefit China;
5. Solicit global recognition of the superiority of China's governance and development models.

The three Global Initiatives are Xi's most systematic attempts to date which seek to put this five-pronged strategy into action. These Initiatives are heavily dependent on soliciting the buy-in of the Global South, in order to obtain the broad-based international support necessary for the creation of a Sino-centric world order, officially presented as "the common destiny for humankind."

To be clear, Xi has expressed that he is not reinventing the wheel, but simply aims to make the world fairer. In his view, it is the US-led West, not China, which is revisionist, by allegedly imposing their interests and values onto the international system, all in the name of upholding the liberal international order. In contrast, Xi has portrayed China as fulfilling its duty as a "responsible great power," actively trying to "steer" the international system to be respectful of other states. This assertion legitimises Xi's tactic of calling his vision of a Sino-centric order an "international system centred on the United Nations," and one which defends the interests of the Global South.

About the Author

Dr Olivia Cheung (DPhil, Oxon) is Research Fellow of the China Institute at SOAS University of London. She is the author of Factional-Ideological Conflicts in Chinese Politics: To the Left or to the Right? (Amsterdam University Press, 2023; e-book gold open access) and co-author of The Political Thought of Xi Jinping (Oxford University Press, 2024). Her current research project is on China's Global Strategy. Prior to SOAS, she taught Chinese politics and East Asia's political economy at the University of Warwick.

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China-centric Global Governance is here

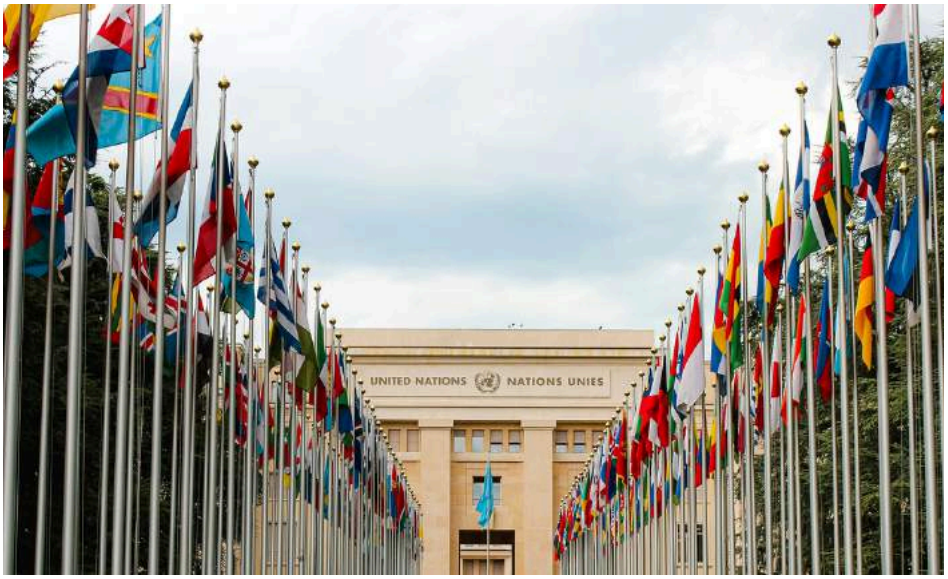
'We must defend the rules-based order' is an oft-repeated slogan by Western politicians. China is now perceived as posing a growing challenge to this global order. However, the conversation surrounding President Xi Jinping's vision for new world governance often falls short in analysing what this order would actually mean for Western democracies. Surely, we would still vote for our preferred politicians, stand in front of an independent judiciary and enjoy freedom of speech?

For China, the goal is clear: safeguarding Communist Party rule by shaping the international order into one that insulates the one-party-state from outside threats and shocks. This ties into the decades-old strategy of the Chinese Communist Party to displace the United States' global hegemony. In this context, it is not far-fetched to suggest that Xi Jinping has rejuvenated the imperial concept of *Tianxia*, all under heaven, to align with his current regime and security strategy.

In 2013, Xi Jinping proposed building 'the common destiny of humankind' which outlines a new international order.

China's pursuit of this alternative order began in 1997 with the Russian Joint Declaration *on the Multipolar World and establishing a New International Order* which aimed to shift global dynamics away from US dominance. For Xi Jinping, together with the 'reunification' of Taiwan, a China-led international order would mark the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the reclaiming of China's place as the leading global power by 2049. This new world order would hence support a growing China, deemed powerful enough to regain its rightful place in the global arena.

In September 2023, China published its proposal for global governance. The proposal incorporates the pillars of the international order that were launched separately earlier: the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilisation Initiative. China has actively promoted these pillars within the United Nations and other international organisations, particularly ones where its leadership is magnified, such as the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. These pillars are included in bilateral intergovernmental agreements in China's strategic partnerships, which remain central to China's foreign affairs strategies.



China has actively leaned on these core pillars to guide its position on international conflicts, evidenced in its peace plan for the Ukrainian crisis.

Furthermore, China launched its global AI Governance Initiative during the October 2023 Belt and Road Conference in Beijing. By proactively introducing new initiatives - which are subsequently integrated into various communiques and agreements - China positions itself as a frontrunner, reducing other nations to passive challengers. Its global governance initiatives follow the red lines that China warns others not to cross : national sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and use of unilateral actions. Leading the way with its AI legislation and global proposal for AI governance, China advocates for the establishment of an international AI governance institution within the UN. It has placed itself in an excellent position to influence regulatory efforts towards state control, notably by prioritising regime safety over ethics or individual rights.

In addition to artificial intelligence, China's global governance initiative mentions other new frontiers: deep sea, polar regions, space, cyber, and digital technologies. Among these frontiers, we can expect similar new governance initiatives in the future. If these are not properly anticipated and their implications analysed, Western democracies will once again be caught off guard and merely play a reactive and defensive role.

If China benefits from the current world order, why change it?

From Beijing's perspective, the current rules-based order, established under the aegis of US liberal democracy, deliberately seeks to contain China's rise. China's challenge to the global order manifests itself as a systemic collision with Western democracies. Not wholeheartedly advocating for an equally '*shared future*', China rather prioritises regime security, encompassing everything from technology dominance to securing favourable conditions for Chinese corporations abroad.

While simultaneously enforcing its red lines, China - acting as a typical Great Power - often ignores international agreements when these do not align with its interests. China has dishonoured the Joint Declaration between the United Kingdom and China and has occupied and militarised parts of the South China Sea, actively using grey legal areas and hybrid tactics against Taiwan and the Philippines. A China-centric global governance system would likely dismiss these pain points.

Moreover, Xi Jinping sees the 'reunification' of Taiwan with the motherland as a historic mission that will not be left for future generations.

Achieving this reunification is key to China's national rejuvenation and the fulfilment of the *China Dream* by 2049. Although the global governance proposal does not mention Taiwan – as it is considered an internal affair – it emphasises sovereignty, territorial integrity and accommodating countries' legitimate security concerns. Additionally, the Global Security Initiative also includes the principle of indivisible security.

So what? What would change?

China's proposed global governance model primarily aims to secure the survival of its one-party regime. It thus challenges the core principles of democracy: protection of individual rights, freedom of speech and assembly, and political freedoms. Such suppression of freedoms and speech is already manifesting itself worldwide through the actions of the United Front and other hybrid influencing methods.

China has emerged as a major player on the international stage. It seeks quasi-alliances with countries critical of the West, like Iran and Russia and is nurturing further friendships, with BRICS expected to grow significantly. Anti-American and anti-Western sentiments, along with calls for a more equitable global order, resonate in many countries in the Global South. Furthermore, with Russia, its friend *without limits*, China shares a common goal of reshaping the world order, as highlighted in their joint statement from February 2, 2022, and reiterated by Putin. China's persuasive narratives and championing of the multilateral agenda for developing nations hence pave the way for China to embed its global order pillars in the United Nations and other organisations.

Moreover, China has been on a collision course with Western countries in trade and economic areas for nearly a decade. Through a complex balancing act, China seeks to build a trading system which would ensure its security and self-sufficiency, whilst increasing other countries' dependency on its economy. Western nations are already prey to significant dependencies, easily exploitable for political gain.

In this alternative global order, it's unclear how markets can remain competitive, if Chinese companies continue to reap their state-sponsored fruits, and how towering Chinese mercantilism can be avoided.

The right to development is one of Beijing's core interests. Its global governance proposal aims to institutionalise its needs when it climbs up value chains and requires access to technologies it lacks: "*technological advances should…not become means of restricting and containing other countries' development*".

If China's global system prevails, it would signal a concession by the transatlantic alliance, leading European nations to vie for China's attention and business opportunities instead of maintaining unity. Weaker democracies would henceforth see their international influence diminish. Returning to a Europe fraught by the Ukrainian crisis, China's Global Security Initiative argues that the European security architecture would prioritise Russia's interests, potentially at the expense of smaller European nations.

China's global order thus aligns with the security ambitions of major powers, such as Russia, potentially allowing for the expansion of their territorial control, even at the expense of smaller countries like Ukraine.

China's global governance strides are both unconventional and asymmetrical, making it challenging to assess their successes. Finally, slogans such as the '*Community with a shared future for mankind*' evoke harmony and friendship - with such an (ambiguous) promise what could possibly go wrong?

About the Author

Dr Sari Arho Havrén is a RUSI Associate Fellow based in Brussels. She specialises in China's foreign relations, geopolitical and China foresight, and great power competition. She is also a senior advisor for Business Finland and a visiting scholar at the University of Helsinki.

Dr Arho Havrén holds a PhD in general history and international relations. In her China expertise role, she was previously affiliated with the George G Marshall European Center for Security Studies as an adjunct professor and at the Mercator Institute of China Studies (MERICS) as a European China Policy and China Futures Fellow. She has lived in mainland China and Hong Kong for 15 years, working in private and public sectors, including in Chinese organisations.

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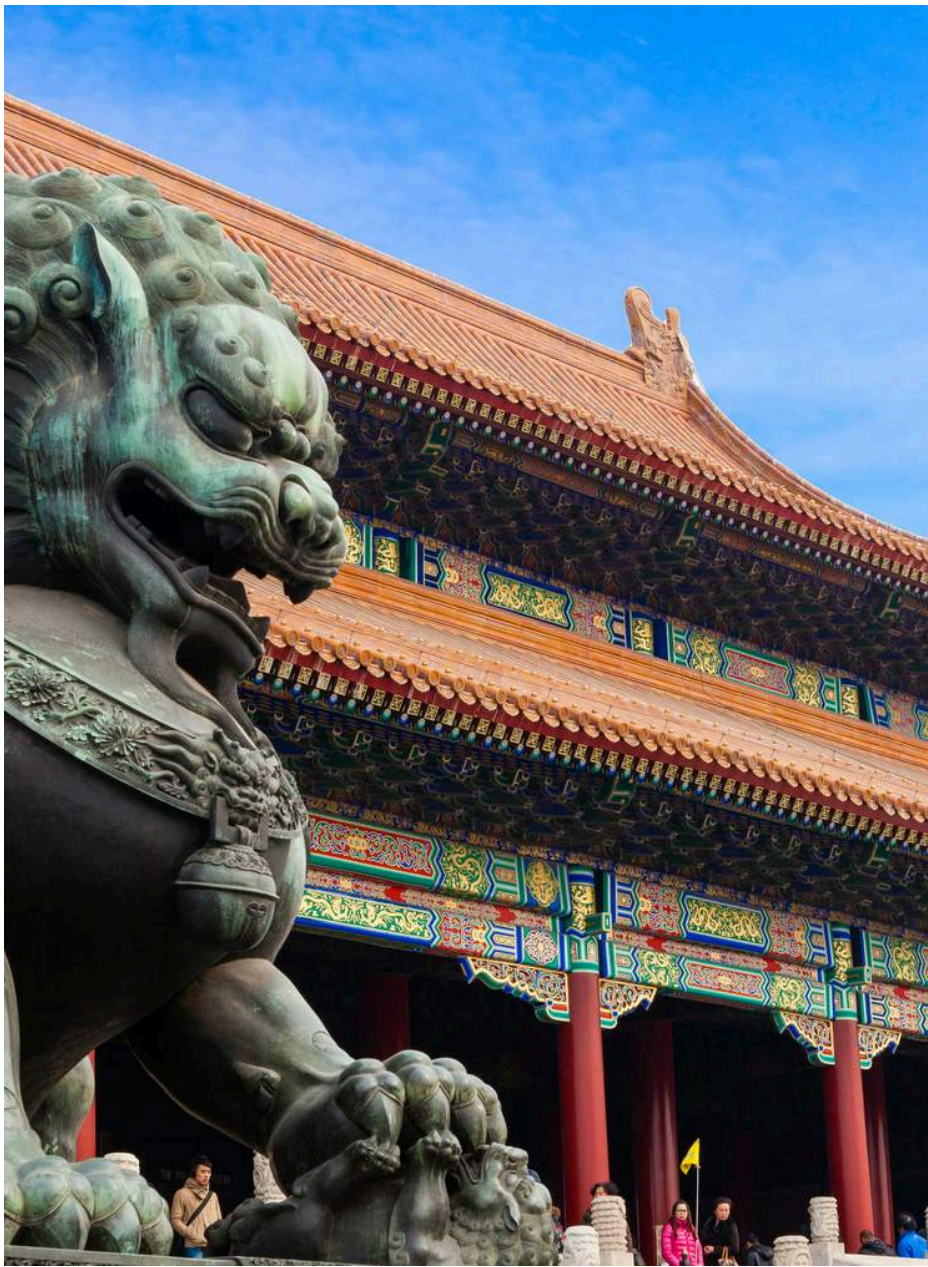
In 2013, China (PRC) launched its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – or, as it was initially termed - and is referred to in China - the "One Belt One Road". Originally, the Initiative produced a trickle of interest as to whether it offered a blueprint of how China might seek to remake world order. In the intervening decade, this trickle has become a torrent, with articles appearing in an array of academic journals and more popular publications.



Yet, the BRI is not alone in China's foreign policy activities that have produced considerations of how China might seek to adapt or more comprehensively change world order. Indeed, China's views on world order have been subject to a myriad of research and evaluation for decades. A gross generalisation of this work indicates that since (at least) the 1990s we have seen three cohorts seeking to understand China's engagement with, and visions of, world order.

First, those who seek to understand China's behaviours within existing sites of order – amongst whom are Rosemary Foot, Nicola Leveringhaus, and Courtney Fung. Second, scholars who focus on what the sources of China's views on world order are. In particular, scholars such as William Callahan, Astrid Nordin, and Feng Zhang who explore the ancient Chinese order(s) and draw on the lessons from Confucianism and other philosophies. This research informs their analysis of China's order and other key aspects of order such as leadership. The last group of scholars postulates that China, as a rising power, will seek to remake global order to better align with its interests - presenting a clearer opposition to the 'West'. Unsurprisingly, these three different 'buckets' of literatures make different assessments of how China views the future of world order - and each can provide ample evidence to support its case.

My starting point here is to suggest that we can gain something from each cohort to create a framework to better understand the multiple (and competing) views present in China on the future of world order. Yet, in doing so, it is essential to avoid clashing ontologies, or diametrically opposed assumptions, about 'world order'. The huge resulting benefit is identifying that different emerging orders may be influenced by differing aspects of the views in China.

What is order?

In the 1990s and early 2000s the term 'world order' or 'global order' was hallmarked by the proliferation of formal institutions and rules collectively termed the 'liberal international order' or the '(liberal) rules-based international order'.

I would argue that the monicker 'liberal' can be used to describe the contents (the subject and objectives), the members (the domestic organisation of states or economies) and/or the type of process for decision-making and action. China, whether engaging or observing these institutions, provided a critique of each of these elements. Slightly departing from this approach, I view world order as the patterns of engagement between states which generate predictable patterns of behaviour and a common corpus of topics that comprise the 'international' (which may be liberal and may include formal rules).

China's view of world order

Since reclaiming its permanent United Nations Security Council seat, reforming, and opening up, China has refined its views on world order into different baskets – which institutions to reform (through the processes), which to reject (often by non-membership), and who to build new relationships or groupings with.

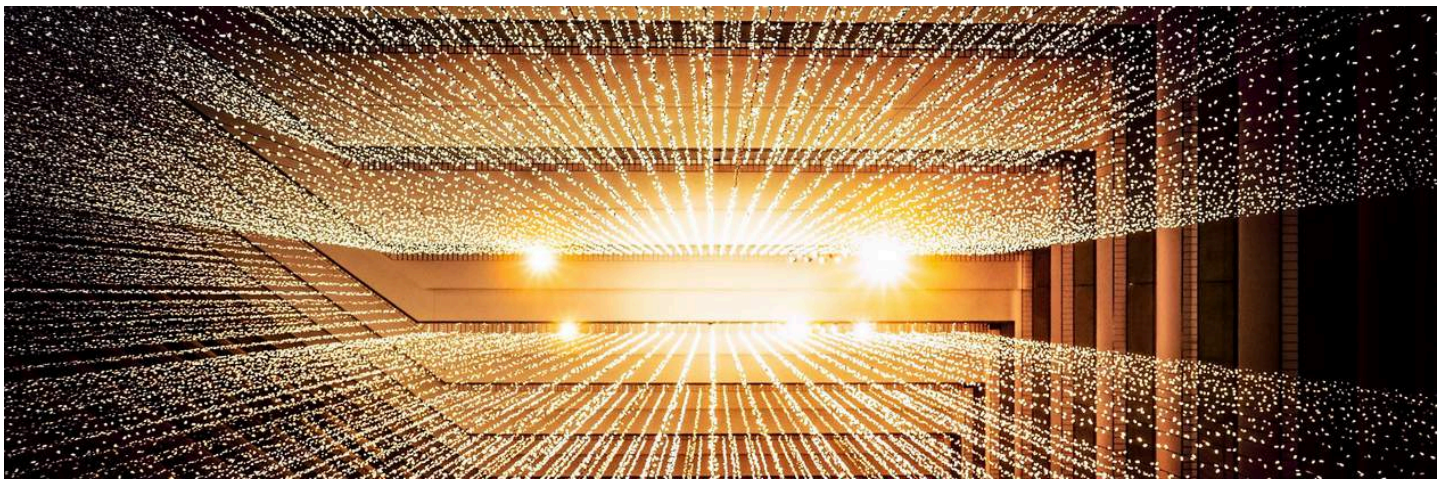
For many, this exercise has been highly visible – for example, the creation (and expansion) of the BRICS, the New Development Bank, the Belt and Road Initiative, the contributions to UN Peacekeeping, the vehement rejection of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) actions, and the partial engagement with UN sanctions.

This organising and development does not only involve China – it also fundamentally affects other actors, and as Mark Leonard argued in 2008:

"The Chinese state, […], has got off the conveyor belt that seemed to be leading it towards a Western political and economic settlement. […] The story of the next thirty years will be about how a more self-confident China reaches out and shapes the world. For governments in Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, and even the Middle East, China's rise means that there is not longer a binary choice between assimilation to the West and isolation." (Leonard, 2008, p.117).

But the presence of choice also means that China needs to clarify the alternative order that it is offering, as well as the leadership (and public goods) that it will provide to achieve its preferred order. I argue that in the 1990s and the 2000s there was a complex process of refinement being undertaken and, as Bergsten et al. concluded:

"the presumption that there is room for China in the US-defined and US-led global world order has proven to be flawed. … China does not now look to challenge [the US] in that role, but China clearly challenges current US assumptions about that role." (2008, p.238).



Foot and Walter also noted that "It [China] has not yet readily embraced a leadership role in relation to global order problems ...." (2010, pp.299-300). Hence, China's views on world order (whilst still in progress) need to comprise three elements: a reconsideration of the contents (what should or can states do collectively); a review of the institutional organisation (formal structures, rules, processes); and a fundamental redefinition of leadership.

The first element – the contents of order – is simultaneously the clearest and the least developed. The expression is often used about China that it seeks a 'non-normative order'. Such a minimal international order is based upon non-interference and respect for sovereignty. Yet, China has also identified the need to develop instruments of order to address cross-boundary issues including digital and cyber, space, health, and climate. Hence, in the last decade China's views on order have radically shifted in terms of what the contents of order should be.

In relation to the second and third of these elements – organisation and leadership – this is where the literature drawing on previous Chinese orders, as well as wider literatures on Chinese business practices and management, can be particularly helpful.

For example, the work of scholars like Astrid Nordin, William Callahan, and Feng Zhang indicates China's different types of leadership. They highlight the difference between 王 (*wang*) and 霸 (*ba*) – a distinction found in Confucian tradition. This distinction draws a line between 'kingly' leadership practices (*wang*) and hegemonic (coercive) practices (*ba*) and identified practices of leaders (Nordin and Smith) but also highlights the relationship between leaders and followers. These literatures thus study Chinese views of order by focusing on the relationships China builds. Furthermore, the prominence of the phrase, 'community of common destiny' or 'community of common future' used by Xi Jinping to describe relations with (for example) Vietnam, seems to emulate ideas of China as a benevolent 'kingly' regional leader.

This, therefore, also highlights the importance of the different memberships or groupings of states that Chinese views of world order comprise. A particularly useful framework for understanding these views is provided by Shaun Breslin and Alice Ba who have (separately) studied the dynamics of leadership and followership. Additionally, studies must focus on how order can be maintained without formal institutional structures, rules and mechanisms for dispute management or enforcement, rather through relationships. Drawing on Richard Solomon and Chas Freeman's work on China's negotiating behaviour, China's different approach to leaderships naturally produces a different approach to negotiating world order. China's starting position is then not one of grand design, but rather the development of a series of relationships, the emergence of a common agenda, and the development of common principles (1999, p.58) stemming from adoption of 'principled' negotiation positions - rather than presentation of a series of demands from leaders (1999, p.71).

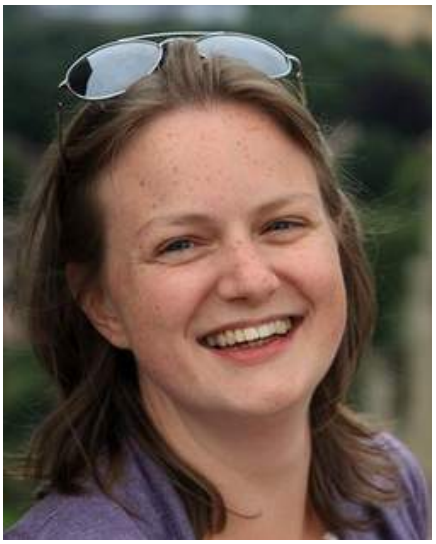
Finally, once there are agreements about relationships, agendas, and principles, there can be more specific and detailed agreements but also a crucial phase of implementation (and alignment). Hence, a Chinese view of world order might centre on the process of order rather than the contents. If we consider the BRI in this frame, I would argue this is how we have moved from China building relationships with BRI countries,

to identifying particular projects and then adapting and implementing.

Fundamentally, I see that there are multiple views of world order in China. In part, this reflects the debates within China, or the different areas where the world seeks ordered interactions, but it is also the result of changes in the world. Hence, we are rapidly moving towards multiple orders, each with different configurations of 'core states', different types of relationships between states, and different norms of behaviour. Some of these norms developed through 'logics of appropriateness', others through 'logics of consequences'. Some might align with Confucian approaches to moral leadership, while others focus on regimes and structures. Some are global – both in membership and scope – and others regionally defined.

About the Author

Catherine Jones is a lecturer at the University of St Andrews, previously she was a research fellow at the University of Warwick (2012-2018) and received her PhD from the University of Reading. Her research focuses on three areas of work:
(1) agency of East Asian states in international order including China's engagement with global order,
(2) the China-North Korea relationship,
(3) and the politics and development in Southeast Asia. Across these areas she has incorporated wargames (also known as simulations or serious games) and wargaming into her teaching and as an analytical tool for her research. In this context she has particular interests in engaging with diverse perspectives and incorporating voices from less prominent parts of the world.



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